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The diary of an undercover agent in Mexico's war on drugs¹

Diario de un agente encubierto [Diary of an undercover agent], by Tomás Borges, Mexico City, Temas de Hoy, 2013, 342pp., £20 (paperback), ISBN 9786070718519

How do Mexican intelligence agents operate in the context of the Mexican war on drugs (*guerra contra el narcotráfico en México*)?² Under the pseudonym Tomás Borges, the author of this book attempts to respond to this question through his memoir of 15 years of professional activity as an intelligence agent. This chronicle tries to demystify the internal dynamics of intelligence agencies and the most recurrent practices of those responsible for Mexican national security during the period from 1997 to 2008. Borges' background has allowed him to specialise in analysing the symbiotic relationship that exists between members of the security community and criminal organizations.³ This is well-illustrated in his works *Maquiavelo para narcos* (*Machiavelli for narcs*)⁴ and *Arte de la guerra para narcos* (*Art of war for narcs*),⁵ where he demonstrates a comprehensive analytical focus, moving from realist and traditional postures, toward the reflexive and critical approaches demonstrated in *Diario de un agente encubierto*. In the *Diario de un agente encubierto*, Borges makes use of narrative to relate illustrative anecdotes derived from his professional experience in areas of tactical and operative analysis during the so-called drugs war (also known as the Mexican war on drugs). Borges' book is important, not least because of the magnitude of Mexico's place in the international trade in narcotics. Indeed, the journalist Roberto Saviano recently examined the global trade in cocaine through a study of Mexico. Signally, Saviano asserted that

Mexico is the origin of everything [and if] you disregard Mexico, you'll never understand the destiny of democracies transformed by drug traffic. If you disregard Mexico, you'll never find the route that follows the smell of money, you won't realize how the odor of criminal money becomes a winning smell that has very little to do with the stench of death, poverty, barbarity, and corruption.⁶

In *Diario de un agente encubierto* Borges describes, and reflects on, the tensions arising from operational errors and efforts to professionalise the Mexican intelligence services. These were exacerbated by the fact Borges' narrative coincides with an era in which the issues of national security and intelligence were accorded a low priority on the political agenda. Borges was confirmed in many of his opinions when, thanks to his social network forged in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI) and in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, UNAM), he was seconded to the Centre for Investigation and National Security (*Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional*, CISEN) in 1997. Early in his time in the CISEN, Borges recalls the very real pressure applied by the United States' government following the 1998 terrorist attacks on their embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Borges' assignment to counter-terrorism duties gave him up-close and personal experience of liaison with the US Department

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² According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports, Mexico is a major drug producing and transit country. Its proximity to the United States means that it is the main foreign supplier of cannabis, a crucial entry point for Latin American cocaine and Asian methamphetamine to the vast North American market. On this, see Ed Vulliamy, *Amexica: War Along the Borderline* (London: Bodley Head, 2010).

³ On the rise of drug-related crime in Mexico, see Grillo, *El Narco*; and Hernández, *Narcoland*.

⁴ Borges, *Maquiavelo para narcos*.

⁵ Borges, *Arte de la guerra para narcos*.

⁶ Saviano, *ZeroZeroZero*, 37. For an insightful review of Saviano's book, see House, Review of *ZeroZeroZero*, 531–4.

of State - and assorted Latin American intelligence agencies - as the Mexican state sought to professionalize its anti-terrorist capabilities. Mexican personnel did this in partnership with their American counterparts at the burgeoning US Counter Terrorism Intelligence Centre (CTIC).⁷ Despite this, the Mexican government's priorities lay not in tracing and targeting radical groups from the Middle East or East Africa. Instead, the main effort of Mexican counter-terrorism was directed towards the capture of the leaders of the Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People (ERPI) as well as Mexican-based members of the Basque separatist terrorist group *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA).

The defeat of the PRI in the presidential election in 2000 – after 71 years in power – would imply the turn of the century encompassed an era of political transition in Mexico. (Although not necessarily for the good). Borges argues that the subsequent accession to power of the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, PAN) ruined the progress made on security issues during the 1990s. This was primarily down to two factors. First, the new administration dismantled key parts of the intelligence services (which they accused of having been used for the purpose of political espionage). This caused deep fissures within the federal public administration (witness, for example, the power struggle between senior officials of the Federal Preventive Police (*Policia Federal Preventiva*, PFP) and the newly-created Public Security Secretariat (*Secretaría de Seguridad Pública*, SSP)). Second, the security cabinet, charged with directing the budgets, priorities and resource allocation of the intelligence agencies were inefficient and ineffective. Because of such failings, the terrorist attacks of 11 September on the US were not entirely unwelcome to some Mexican intelligence officers because they demonstrated the reality of the threat from terrorism – which some members of the new government had seemed to believe had been largely imaginary.

At the structural level, the PAN administrations did pass a national security law, regulated intelligence activities, and strengthened the intelligence capabilities of federal police forces. However, many of the proposed reforms generated unnecessary bureaucratic friction at the operational level. This is exemplified by the integration process of the PFP and the Federal Investigation Agency (*Agencia Federal de Investigación*, AFI) to the SSP in the framework of the notorious 'Mexico Safe' strategy. In this context, Borges relates how his assignments included being charged to capture a leader of Los Zetas⁸ – and to take charge of the former leader of the Gulf Cartel in a maximum-security prison. This episode granted Borges a sobering insight into the power that certain criminals wield in Mexico – power seemingly hardly diminished even when they are prison inmates. For Borges, the generic problems in Mexican intelligence remained despite his years of well-directed effort and bureaucratic in-fighting. His last assignments to the International Airport of Mexico City (*Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de México*, AICM) and to the Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, PGR) made it evident to Borges that inefficiency and corruption remained inherent in the security institutions in Mexico. To illustrate this, the author vividly recounts the modus operandi of the network that worked with the personnel and resources of the Presidential

⁷ The CTIC was set up after 9/11 as a joint venture between the CIA and a number of foreign intelligence services as part of the US 'War on Terror'. Four years later, one former CIA counterterrorism expert stated that '[t]he vast majority of [recent counterterrorism] successes [have] involved our CTICs'. And, in the majority of successful operations, '[t]he boot that went through the door was foreign.' Another former CIA operative commented that 'CTICs were a step forward in codifying, organizing liaison relationships that elsewhere would be more ad hoc'. Dana Priest, "Foreign Network at Front of CIA's Terror Fight: Joint Facilities in Two Dozen Countries Account for Bulk of Agency's Post-9/11 Successes." *Washington Post*, November 18, 2005.

⁸ In 2009 the journalist Ed Vulliamy reported that 'the Zetas, originally established as an enforcement wing of the narco-trafficking Gulf Cartel, but now a paramilitary militia in its own right, highly trained in combat and probably the most powerful drug-trafficking organisation in the world.' Ed Vulliamy, "The Zetas."

General Staff (*Estado Mayor Presidencial*, EMP), PGR, AFI, and PFP on behalf of criminal organisations.

Borges does not write to his audience from the academic domain and forgoes references to theoretical postulates or abstract concepts to support his arguments. He relates his story from a practical perspective, describing his day-to-day work as an intelligence agent. When portraying each of his activities at the heart of Mexican intelligence, Borges attempts to go beyond common assumptions and stereotypes. The common references to the ‘intelligence services’ in Mexico, widely perceived as the corrupt perpetrators of the so-called ‘dirty war’, political persecution, the repression of dissent, and personal revenge, have all been sustained in a climate of myth and suspicion. Therefore, much of the significance of Borges’ work lies in his debunking of many of these half-truths and myths that prevail in the public discourses about these organisations. Through this careful process of demystification, the central theme of the work emerges: namely, the identification of the grey zone between criminals and law enforcement agencies in Mexico whose exposure says a great deal about the way those networks, on both sides of the divide, operate.

As a primary source, this work is very valuable, not only for its narrative and historical framework but also for the detail of the descriptions that Borges gives about aspects of the Mexican intelligence and national security which would otherwise be hidden from public view. For example, concerning recruitment, Borges reveals the characteristics of the evaluation and selection process, especially about the admission profile and on the examinations that the candidates are required to pass to enter CISEN. Also, with respect to training, Borges exposes part of the theoretical knowledge required, and the practical exercises utilized, in the courses taught by CISEN and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) personnel. Borges also outlines the main elements of the doctrinal corpus, the hi-tech devices employed, as well as the procedures that governed his daily activities. Indeed, the accuracy of the data that he shares regarding operating protocols, criminal profiles, press reports, informal conversations, communication codes, and investigations files all strengthen Borges’ book considerably. These elements make this work a relevant source of consultation for students and researchers of intelligence and national security in the contemporary context.

Diario de un agente encubierto is far from being a superficial narrative and represents rather more than a simple chronicle of events in the life of an intelligence agent. Borges frequently elaborates on his narrative in expansive fashion, and he reflects thoughtfully on what he has lived, witnessed and regretted. He is to be commended for the fact he is unafraid to criticise certain of his own decisions in an honest and disarming fashion. One would think that an agent of intelligence, a figure usually portrayed as one indoctrinated by the state, would never make critical judgments towards his institutions and his chiefs. Borges does so, without losing respect for people or falling into crude and vulgar reproaches. His capacity for self-reflection contributes to the real value of this text. Borges’ memoir represents an impressive indictment of the damage that is wrought by corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, incompetence, voluntarism, irresponsibility, errors, and the unreasonable attitude of too many of those responsible for the national security of Mexico. But his judgements are not simply negative. Borges also offers several possible solutions to clearly-identified problems, and even more importantly, he recognizes the efforts of colleagues and superiors who have risked their careers and their lives in the line of duty.

Given the nature of Borges’ text, it is hard to make comparisons with other works. This is because this diary is unique, and to date, there is no other similar work that tackles the topic

of Mexican intelligence from the inside, and with such an experiential approach. Perhaps the closest text is *La Charola* (The Plate) by Sergio Aguayo Quezada. *La Charola's*⁹ documentary research addresses the origins and evolution of intelligence services in Mexico from an external perspective – but with a rigorous and critical academic analysis. It is worth mentioning that the topic of intelligence in Mexico has been scarcely discussed by politicians, intelligence professionals, and society in general. In this context, it is thus possible to affirm that the relevance of Borges' publication lies not just in the uniqueness of his narrative, but in his challenge to open the 'Pandora's box' of Mexican intelligence. Borges' book is most welcome in the wake of decades of struggle against drug trafficking and organized crime in Mexico (where intelligence services have played a crucial role, albeit on both sides of the law).

Borges' book represents a remarkable contribution to the study of intelligence and national security in Mexico. Rather than subjecting its content to the superficial explanation of the objective structures that govern contemporary Mexican intelligence, the author allows his readers to witness the reality of the day-to-day functioning of these institutions. Throughout the text, the reader will understand elements of the processes that have led to the manipulation and distortion of the national security of the Mexican state. The sustained quality of Borges' memoir means that it deserves to be read by more than just specialists of Mexican national security. In short, *Diario de un agente encubierto* should be required reading for all scholars and practitioners of contemporary intelligence.

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⁹ Aguayo, *La Charola*.